

“Compassion vs. Codependency: Where Do We Draw the Line?” by Jacquie Wallen

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The Sixth Sunday of Easter

In our worship services, we often chant: *“Ubi caritas, deus ibi est,”* meaning, “Where there is caritas, God is there.” Caritas is a, if not the, core Christian virtue. It is the unconditional selfless love of others.

Today’s lectionary reading from first Peter is contains an example of what many might consider to be a Christian perspective on being virtuous:

Essentially, the reading says: Always do good. Probably no one will harm you for doing good but even if they do, it is better to suffer for being good, if it is God’s will, than to suffer for doing evil. After all, look how Christ suffered for you.

This is the part of Christianity that has always scared me. The suffering part.

Do you remember the Tennessee Williams play, *The Glass Menagerie*. Remember the bossy, meddlesome mother, Amanda Wingfield, who sells magazine subscriptions to her friends over the phone. She always makes some small talk before she makes the pitch and her stock response to her friends’ complaints about their lives is always: “Heaven have mercy! You’re a Christian martyr, yes, that’s what you are, a Christian martyr.” This is a compliment, intended to butter up her friends so they will purchase or renew their

subscriptions. The implication, of course, is that being a Christian martyr is a good thing.

I have always been terrified of becoming a Christian martyr. I didn't get this fear of martyrdom from my religious upbringing, which was Episcopal- light. I don't even recall hearing about martyrs in church. But I attended the Saturday afternoon movie matinee religiously in my childhood, probably more regularly than I attended church. A lot of movies about ancient Rome that included scenes of persecution of Christian martyrs by Nero and other Roman rulers came out during my childhood. I found them very upsetting and traumatic. Maybe some of you remember them: The Robe, Demetrius and the Gladiators, and Quo Vadis are three that I remember.

Of course, the sacrifices that most of us end up making are far more likely to be of the "Blessed-be-the-tie-that-binds" variety than of the "Throw-her-to-the-lions" variety.

But sometimes those ties that bind can turn into ties that shackle. Sometimes we get out of control of our helping. Have you ever felt that the amount of helping of others that you do has gotten out of control? Have you ever felt that you are spending so much time helping others that you are not able to meet your own needs? Have you ever felt resentful of the demands that others make on you? Of course, all of us feel that way sometimes, but if you as an individual or we as a congregation are feeling that way chronically over a long period of time, then it is probably time to take stock of things and maybe even to step back a little.

The first Peter reading that I mentioned before doesn't say "You must always be good no matter how much suffering it causes you or others." It says that it is better to suffer for doing good "if it is God's will." This is an important qualifying phrase. "If it is God's will."

In second Corinthians it says: "Remember this: Whoever sows

sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work...You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion."

Give out of abundance, not out of scarcity. It says. The key phrase in this quote is: "Give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion." It warns that God is not really pleased by help that is given against the giver's will or resentfully. We tend to deal with unwillingness or resentment by trying to change our feelings and attitude. But sometimes the way to give freely and without resentment is to limit our giving to a level that does not overwhelm us.

We tend to take the Bible as urging unselfish and limitless giving, as in the famous quote from Matthew: "Whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have your cloak also.⁴ And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two.⁴² Give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away."

But as Omar Olmland, in his book, *The Third Mile: A Biblical View of Codependency* has pointed out, though the Bible recommends walking the second mile, nowhere does it recommend walking a third mile.

Olmland says: *"There is an insidious virus loose in Christendom. This virus is codependency. We are all infected. Yet in some its*

manifestation is minimal and in others, maximal. It produces what are known as codependent blind spots. These blind spots cause us to misapply and misinterpret the word love...The infiltration of the virus permeates the clergy, the lay-leadership of the church, lay-counselling programs, one-on-one relationships, and group relationships. This virus, therefore, causes us to distort our rightful relationship with God, others, the environment, institutional structures, and ourselves."

Codependency has a bad name. It is a term that emerged from the observation that friends and family members of alcoholics and addicts often tend to enable the addictions of those they are trying to help. And how do they do this? By helping too much.

People tend to think of codependency as a dysfunctional and pathological condition brought about by trying to help a person who is dysfunctional or suffers from a pathological condition themselves. It creates a vicious circle of dependency, control, and resentment. But I don't think of it as a pathology at all. I think it starts out as normal, loving response to pain, suffering, or need in someone one cares about. Helping others is good. The problem is that sometimes it evolves into a cycle of dependency that overwhelms the helper and interferes with the helpee's ability to take responsibility for their own life. Instead of going the first or second mile we find ourselves going the third and fourth and the umpteenth mile with no end in sight. By that point we have established a precedent for helping that we don't know how to get out of without harming the person we are helping, which is the opposite of what we set out to do.

Setting boundaries is as important for Christians as it is for everyone else. But how do we know what God's will is in these

matters? How do we decide in our hearts who, when, and how much we will help? I spent a lot of time researching this topic and found that there has been very little written from a Christian perspective about how to set boundaries on helping. I searched Christian writings, I searched the mental health literature, I searched art, poems, jokes and everything else I could think of. There is a fair amount of literature on setting boundaries in general but almost nothing on setting boundaries on helping as a Christian.

I did find the Ormland book that I just told you about. I also found an article called "Jesus Set Boundaries" by Bill Gaultiere: on a website called Soul Shepherding.

Gaultiere says:

One of the things that helped turn me around before I totally burned out was to look prayerfully at the life of Jesus. I studied the gospels carefully and learned some things that surprised me because I hadn't been taught them in church. I saw Jesus setting boundaries repeatedly.

I discovered that in his humanity Jesus had limitations that he accepted in a relaxed way. Like being in a human body that needed nourishment and rest and could only be in one place at a time. Like there only being 24-hours in a day. (Unlike the ambitious, overworking leaders I've talked with Jesus didn't try to accomplish 26 hours of activity in a 24 hour day.)

Jesus had personal needs that he put priority on – sometimes even over the needs of other people – and he did so without feeling guilty. Primarily his personal soul care had to do with separating himself from people to be alone with God... Jesus lived in a rhythm of life that not only kept him free from burn out, but far beyond that it kept him full of God, full of grace and truth, and therefore ready and able to be compassionate and generous in his response to people, their needs, interruptions, and crisis situations.

Unlike many devoted servants of the Lord, Jesus did not live on the defensive, overextending himself and getting more and more tired and then finally taking a break. Instead, Jesus lived on the offensive in dealing with temptation and Satan. He was proactive in that he consistently invested in his intimacy with (God) and this gave him energy and focus.

Another thing I saw in the gospels is that Jesus wasn't always nice to people. Often he didn't do what people wanted him to do. There were many people he didn't help. And whenever he did help other people he expected them to do their part. For instance, even in Jesus' miracles he asked people to do something, usually something they felt they couldn't do. (The blind man had to walk a long way to get to the pool of Siloam to wash the mud out of his eyes.)

Buddhism, like Christianity, is a religion that is based on compassion. Pema Chodron is an American Buddhist nun who has written a lot on codependency, which she calls "idiot compassion." Idiot compassion, she says is a near enemy of compassion. Virtues, she says, have both near and far enemies. The far enemy of compassion is its opposite, cruelty. We can mostly recognize and for the most part are able to avoid or at least make amends for cruelty. The enemies we have trouble with are compassion's near enemies. These look so much like compassion that it is often difficult to recognize them for what they are but they are definitely enemies of compassion. These are pity, overwhelm, and idiot compassion.

About pity, Pema Chodron says (and I quote): *"Pity or professional warmth is easily mistaken for true compassion. When we identify ourselves as the helper, it means we see others as helpless. Instead of feeling the pain of the other person, we set ourselves apart. If we've ever been on the receiving end of pity we know how painful it feels. Instead of warmth and support all we feel is distance. With true compassion these up-down identities are stripped away."*

Overwhelm, I think we all recognize. Dictionary definitions include:

- To bury or drown beneath a huge mass.
- To defeat completely.
- To give too much of a thing to (someone); inundate.

I'm sure you all know the feeling!

"The third near enemy of compassion," Pema Chodron says, "is idiot compassion. This is when we avoid conflict and protect our good image by being kind when we should say a definite 'no.'"

Buddhism is about compassion but also about non-attachment. Buddhists believe that attachment is the root of all suffering. Attachment basically is a kind of addiction to positive feelings, including the feeling that we are a "good person," that leads us to want to control people and things around us in order to produce the outcomes that we desire. Rather than making us feel better, this tends to make us feel worse. Non-attachment, or letting go, as they say in the Twelve Step programs, is the cure for attachment and idiot compassion.

What do we have to let go of to avoid attachment, idiot compassion, and codependency? Jesus gave us plenty of models for our behavior. We need to let go of:

- Our need to be liked
- Our need to please others
- Our need to be a "good" person
- Our need to avoid painful feelings
- Our fear of difficult conversations
- Our need to control others
- Our need to avoid ambiguity
- Our fear of taking risks
- *Our fear of making mistakes (added by Pat Conover in the*

discussion following the sermon).

- Our emotional investment in the outcomes of our helping

The issue of setting limits and boundaries is one I have struggled with all of my life. I'm empathic, I'm a good listener, I love hearing people's stories and providing them with emotional support or practical help. Most of the time I can give freely and joyfully out of abundance in this area. Sometimes, though, I get in over my head and find I am giving reluctantly or under compulsion. When this happens I need to reconsider the boundaries I am setting.

Here are some warning signals I have learned to attend to and to avoid by setting good limits:

- I am doing more work to solve someone's problem than they are doing themselves
- I am feeling overwhelmed by this person's problems
- I am feeling resentful about this person's demands on me
- The person I am helping is angry at me or being abusive toward me
- I am feeling manipulated by the person I am helping
- I have no exit strategy
- The person feels entitled to more than I can give
- Other areas of my life are suffering because of the help I give this person

Setting reasonable limits is often difficult. It requires self-awareness, discernment, honesty, and tact. *It requires being able to ask for help ourselves (added by Billy Amoss after the sermon). And it is often easier when we have one or more safe people, for example, in Seekers, our Mission Group, to talk it over with in confidentiality (added by Marjory Bankson after the sermon).* Setting reasonable limits may make others angry. It is risky for us and for the person we are helping.

It is important, though, to remember that everyone has access to the God of their understanding. The people we want to help have

access to that God just as we do. That's what the hymn "His Eye is on the Sparrow" always reminds me of. It is important for us to realize this and to recognize that we, as Ron Kurtz says, are not God. We are just compassionate humans doing the best we can within our limits. And we need to recognize and honor those limits as Jesus did. When we do that, the tie that binds can be truly blessed and we can act as a part of the body of Christ, giving freely and generously, without reluctance or compulsion, what we have decided in our hearts to give.